

Does Increased Water Access Empower Women?

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ABSTRACT *Saskia Ivens examines the extent to which women have benefited from increased water access. She argues that while gender equality is crucial for the sustainability of water programmes, its advancement through water programmes has been limited. She calls for more impact studies and suggests the use of empowering participatory approaches.*

KEYWORDS *gender equality; women's empowerment; gender; water and sanitation; water management; participation*

Introduction

Gender equality is understood as the situation where women and men enjoy the same status and have equal rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for realizing their full human rights and potential. It implies equal access to and control over resources by women and men (CIDA, 1999; <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/osagi/conceptsanddefinitions.htm>, accessed 20 October 2007). Women's empowerment is defined as identifying and redressing power imbalances in order to give women more autonomy to manage their own lives (<http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment.htm>, accessed 20 October 2007). It requires social, economic, political, and legal empowerment (CIDA, 1997).

Programme effectiveness

Since the 1970s and 1980s, women's involvement in water management has been considered crucial to improving programme and project effectiveness due to women's considerable roles, concerns and priorities in water management.

A study by the IRC in 88 communities in 15 countries and a desk study of 121 World Bank-financed projects show that women's involvement is the key for effective community water projects (Van Wijk-Sijbesma, 1998; <http://www.irc.nl/page/37271>, accessed 20 October 2007). This is confirmed by various case studies compiled by the Gender and Water Alliance (GWA), UN agencies, and others (Shrestha, 2002; GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006). Most water conferences have called for the incorporation of a gender perspective into water policies and programmes as well (GWA, 2003; Khosla and Pearl, 2003). Major international declarations on gender equality emphasize the importance of water access to gender equality (UN, 1996 and <http://www.un.org/>

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womenwatch/daw/cedaw/text/econvention.htm#article14, accessed 20 October 2007).

For many organizations, the effectiveness and efficiency of programmes and projects is currently the most important reason to incorporate a gender perspective (GWA, 2003). This is not to say that all water policies, programmes, and projects meaningfully address women's roles, concerns, and priorities in water management. Many projects and policies pay lip-service only, while others explicitly promote an approach that excludes some women (Cleaver, 2003). Most water programmes and projects that address gender concerns focus on women's domestic roles and related concerns for drinking water and sanitation, while women's water concerns and priorities for food security and environmental sustainability receive less attention. Even more so, most organizations focus on either domestic or productive roles. When not realizing how women's concerns in the different sectors influence each other, this undermines the programme's effectiveness (Cleaver, 2003; GWA, 2003; Khosla and Pearl, 2003; Lahiri-Dutt, 2007).

Almost all conference declarations, programmes, and projects that address gender concerns give priority to women's participation in public decision-making in the management of water facilities (Khosla, 2003; GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

Benefits of increased water access

With increased attention to women's roles, concerns, and priorities in water management, the extent to which women and girls have benefited needs to be determined. Have women and girls benefited from increased water access and from increased decision-making in water committees? Has this strengthened women's empowerment and advanced gender equality? In this article, I will point out that the contribution to women's empowerment and gender equality has been limited, and that this puts programme sustainability at risk. In this section, I will refer to the direct benefits women have experienced as a result of increased water access and to the benefits derived from increased decision-making in water

management, while pointing out that it is far less evident that women's participation in water programmes has strengthened women's empowerment and advanced gender equality.

Direct practical benefits from improved access to water supply and sanitation include better health for women and girls due to improved quality and increased quantity of water. Other direct benefits include enhanced dignity, and less exposure to hazards associated with water fetching such as opportunistic gender-based violence, water-borne diseases, animal attacks, and physical problems due to heavy water loads. Direct benefits for children include enhanced school performance due to fewer illnesses as well as reduced absenteeism and dropout by adolescent girls who have a greater need for sanitation facilities at school during menstruation. Water programmes with a focus on, for example, irrigation or fisheries primarily intend to contribute to household food security (UN Millennium Project Task Force on Water and Sanitation, 2005; Fisher, 2006; UNDP, 2006).

The explicit benefits of women's participation in public decision-making and local community structures are less obvious, despite the prominence of women's participation in international declarations. Apart from programme effectiveness, these benefits include increased self-esteem and self-confidence. In addition, the relevance of the opportunity for women to talk to other women in committees should not be underestimated (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

Even then, it is far less evident that women's participation in water programmes contributes to strategic benefits such as women's empowerment and gender equality. Very few reports and case studies refer to women's empowerment or gender equality. Most case studies claiming that programmes have strengthened women's empowerment refer to economic empowerment only (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

Nevertheless, a few best-practice case studies provide examples of changes in household decision-making as a result of water programmes. Some of these changes may be a sign of strengthened women's empowerment (Bell, 2001; Shrestha, 2002; Well, 2005; GWA and UNDP, 2006; Smirat, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

Women's and men's roles and time use

More information is available on women's time use and daily tasks. A look into women's and men's roles and time use provides an indication of women's negotiation power in the household, which is an important element of women's empowerment and gender equality. It becomes clear that it cannot be assumed that increased water access reduces women's workload or strengthens women's empowerment.

Exact figures on time use vary widely between and within regions, per person, over time, and figures may show considerable seasonal variations. Data for Bangladesh, Guatemala, Kenya, Nepal, and the Philippines show that the average working day of rural women is between nine and eleven hours daily, while rural men work an average of seven to ten hours daily (UNDP, 2006). A case study from India reports that 15 to 16 hours is the daily average for women, while a case study from Ghana reports twelve hours for women and nine for men (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006). Between one and eight hours of a woman's day is spent fetching water (Crow and Sultana, 2002; Shrestha, 2002; Upadhyay, 2005; Fisher, 2006; GWA and UNDP, 2006). The rest of the day is spent on a combination of productive tasks, household and community work, and family care. Boys and girls may assist in many of these tasks, with girls tending to be assigned more time-consuming tasks, as well as more tasks at school (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

Owing to the number of hours spent fetching water, it is generally assumed that women's workload decreases with improved water access (Well, 2005; UNDP, 2006). However, several reports and case studies prove that the number of work hours does not necessarily reduce after successful implementation of water programmes. In addition, the majority of case studies show that women who gain access to water do not take up activities that strengthen their empowerment (WaterAid, 2001; GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

A good example is the SNV/PROTOS water supply programme in Benin. Although the programme had defined specific gender objectives and women participated in water management decision-making, a case study shows that women's

participation did not contribute to enhanced negotiation power in the household. As a result, women's workload did not decrease. Nor were women able to use the time gained for preferred activities. Instead of taking up activities that would have increased their economic independence, they used the extra time gained to work in their husbands' fields, as per their husbands' preference. Women's quality of life had improved due to the direct practical benefits of access to water supply, but strategic benefits had not been achieved and gender equality had not been advanced (www.irc.nl/page/7810, accessed 6 October, 2007).

This example demonstrates that action research and impact studies are required to consciously and consistently monitor women's workload and related household negotiation power. Property rights are a key determinant of women's household decision-making. It is clear from the case studies that few women own the land they cultivate and that women have fewer assets than their husbands (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006). However, the access to and control over assets and resources conveys different levels of power and decision-making ability over family labour (Lahiri-Dutt, 2007). As a result, men can decide how their wives' labour will be used, as in the SNV/PROTOS case study.

Programme sustainability

It is evident that a lack of gender equality denies women and girls the opportunity to fulfil their potential. Furthermore, a lack of women's empowerment leads to less sustainable water programmes.

This is most obvious when considering what happens if, for example, a drinking water supply facility breaks down. With increased women's participation in public decision-making and local community structures, chances are that women would demand its immediate repair. However, if repair is not immediately possible, and if women continue to lack voice in household decision-making, it is unlikely that repair or renewal will take place, as it does not affect the daily responsibilities of men, the main household and public decision-makers. In fact, women's workloads may

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subsequently increase, where increased quantities of water and women's engagement in extra activities have raised expectations.

Participation for empowerment

Realizing that women's participation in water programmes will not allow for women's empowerment unless power imbalances between women and men are addressed, it becomes clear that only an empowering participatory approach to programme design and implementation can allow for sustainable advancements in gender equality and programme sustainability.

In collecting best-practice examples, it becomes clear that an empowering participatory approach shows the best results. Three water programmes in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh all achieved progress in women's empowerment and enhanced programme sustainability by using an empowering participatory approach. The study of irrigation programmes in Bangladesh, comparing different approaches used by different NGOs, concludes that the empowerment approach is most successful in enhancing women's irrigation opportunities and improving their social status. The case study from India reports an increase in women's ownership of assets and an increase in women's mobility after implementation of a water supply programme. The case study from a domestic water supply programme in Pakistan reports that women were more self-confident, more aware of their own negotiating power, were more frequently consulted by men, and had a larger role in household decision-making (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006).

The commonalities in programme implementation among the three programmes are: group formation, a focus on meaningful participation by women in decision-making, a simultaneous programme to enhance access to income-generating activities, and, most importantly, a conscious aim and deliberate plan to improve gender relations (GWA and UNDP, 2006; UN OSAGI, 2006). The

programmes go beyond a focus on women's participation in public decision-making only and beyond the application of project approaches and tools that may oversimplify and even undermine gender challenges.

An effective empowering participatory approach requires facilitation of a process that allows power imbalances to be addressed in the household and public domain. It takes into account how ownership of resources and assets and different levels of power shape roles, responsibilities, and opportunities, while monitoring changes over time. Patterns of inclusion and exclusion need to be studied and the relevance of informal negotiation strategies must be taken into account (Cleaver, 2003). It demands a conducive environment where local women and men set the agenda and are able to set gender equality targets, while allowing women to meaningfully raise their concerns in a way that is comfortable to them. Finally, it requires attention to the fact that women are not a homogeneous group but that characteristics such as age and class further define their roles, responsibilities, and opportunities.

Conclusion

More needs to be done to incorporate an effective gender perspective into water policies, programmes, and projects. It has been found that when a gender perspective is applied, women and girls are likely to benefit from increased water access, but that this does not necessarily advance gender equality. As a result, the full potential of women and girls is not used and programme sustainability is at risk.

This calls for the application of an empowering participatory approach. Action research and impact studies are required to consciously assess the impact of water programmes on women's empowerment, and to share experiences of how an empowering approach leads to enhanced sustainability of water programmes.

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